

improving
your
community's
public square

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IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S PUBLIC SQUARE

By W. R. NELSON, JR., and J. A. PORTER¹

In Illinois, as in other midwestern states, the public square is a prominent feature of almost every town. The reason for the frequent occurrence of squares is easy to see when one realizes the long history of the public square as the center of urban life. The tradition of the square originated in ancient Greece and Rome and was handed down to the cities of Renaissance Europe. The great squares of Italian and French cities that may be seen even today are direct ancestors of the square in your own community.

When settlers came from Europe to America it was only natural that they should pattern their towns after the European cities with which they were familiar. Thus a public square became a prominent feature of almost every early American community. When descendants of the early settlers migrated westward they also patterned their new communities after the cities with which they were familiar—the cities of the east. In this way the public square was incorporated into midwestern communities.

As public buildings, stores, churches, and offices were built around the square, the area became the center of downtown activity. Often the courthouse was built in the square itself. Such events as political rallies, band concerts, and appearances by prominent visitors took place in the square and the area served as a meeting place for people who came to town to shop. The public square was the social and commercial center of the community.

Today, with fast transportation, rapid communications, and the advent of outlying business centers, the square has often become a neglected and unused area. But these aspects of modern life have also created a need for the once-prominent but now neglected public square. People who work in the downtown business district or do business there need a convenient place to relax and an opportunity for social contact. The square is an ideal place for this. More important, an attractive public square in the center of the business district can make the entire area more attractive and appealing to potential customers who might otherwise go to outlying shopping centers. A properly landscaped and maintained public square can also do much to offset the impact of surrounding glass, steel, and concrete buildings and busy streets.

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The public square need not necessarily be large or symmetrical. It may be rectangular, circular, or even triangular in shape. Sometimes a small area occupied only by a monument or fountain can be considered a square. In this publication all such areas, regardless of shape, are referred to as squares.

The first step in your program to revitalize the square is to make an analysis of the situation. Consider your community's square from the standpoint of its type (courthouse square, monument square, or open square), and the landscape elements and other features now present on it. The most common landscaping elements are:

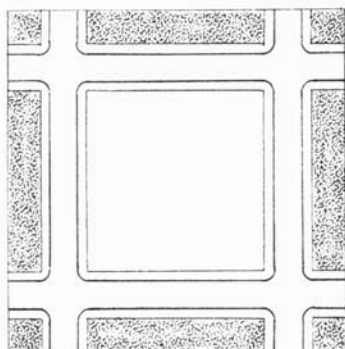
- Access to the square;
- Surfacing materials for walks and other areas;
- Trees and shrubs;
- Outdoor furniture, light fixtures, and signs;
- Play equipment for children.

As these landscape elements are discussed in this publication, see if they are now present in your public square. If they are, consider how to improve them; if they are not, consider whether to install them. You should engage a professional landscape architect to help you achieve the most desirable results possible in choosing and locating these various landscape elements for maximum effect and convenience.

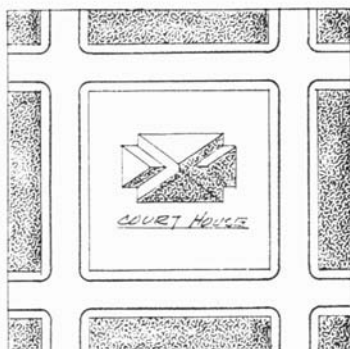
Types of Squares

A common type of square is the courthouse square. Most of the land of this square is usually occupied by an ornate building so large that it dominates not only the square but also the business area around the square. Often the courthouse itself is in need of maintenance and renovation. Similarly, the grounds surrounding the courthouse have not been kept up. There is often no landscaping and there are few, if any, benches and other facilities for public relaxation. In this type of square, space is not sharply defined and does not give a feeling of enclosure because of the prominence of the courthouse. However, the building serves as a unifying element.

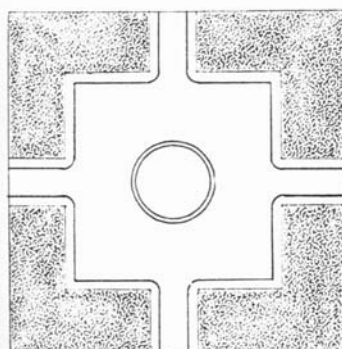
A second type of square resembles the courthouse square except that it does not have a large building situated on it. This square is dominated by surrounding streets and commercial buildings. If it is neglected and not properly landscaped, this type of square will appear to be bleak, ugly, wasted space. With proper landscape design it can be made into an inviting oasis in the center of the business district.



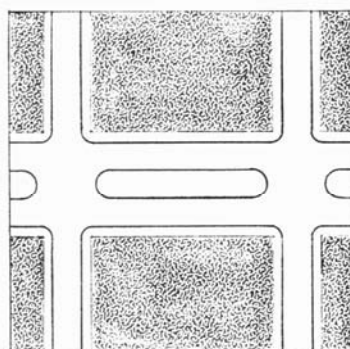
OPEN SQUARE



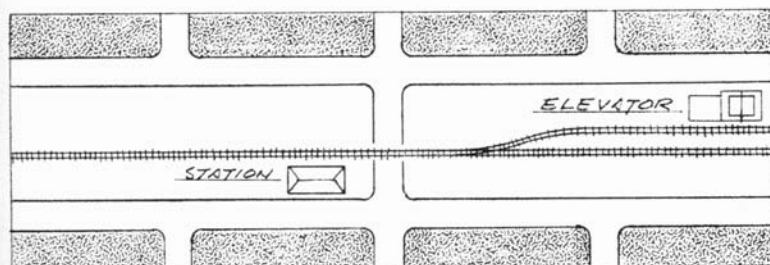
COURT HOUSE SQUARE



TRAFFIC CIRCLE



TRAFFIC ISLAND



RAILROAD AREA

Diagrams of five types of squares are shown in the drawing above.

A large open area in front of a building can also be considered as a type of square. Grounds of railroad stations, large churches, and public buildings sometimes include such an area. This type of square can be developed for the benefit of people who work in the building in question and also for the general public.

Finally, the square may be a small area occupied by a monument or a fountain. The size of this type of square varies greatly. Sometimes it is only the area required by the statue or fountain, while in other cases there may be a grassy area around the central feature. Often this type of square is located in a very busy downtown area and is virtually inaccessible to the public. Nevertheless, it can usually be improved to emphasize the central feature and upgrade the appearance of the area.

Access to the Square

One of the main reasons for renovating the public square is to provide a pleasant area where people may relax. However, no matter how well you design the landscape of the square itself, it will not be used if there is no easy access to it. If the square is surrounded by busy streets, as most public squares are, safe crosswalks must be provided. Crosswalks should be very clearly marked and there must be strict enforcement of pedestrian right-of-way.



This town square is a delightful green open space in the center of the business district. The irregular planting of trees provides a pleasing contrast of light and shade that is inviting during hot summer days.

Once the pedestrian has crossed the street, he should be able to easily enter the square itself. Clipped hedges and border plantings around the square screen the area and make entry into the square difficult. Small openings 3 or 4 feet wide are not sufficient to allow easy public access. Barriers such as this should be removed so that the square will be an open, inviting area.



A square should be kept open so that visual sight lines from surrounding areas are not obstructed. The square in the top photograph is somewhat too open but this will change as newly planted trees mature. The bottom photograph shows a strategically placed crosswalk that affords easy and safe access to the square.

Another kind of barrier often found around squares is a solid row of parked cars. Access to the square and the visual effect of the area is impaired by these cars. The most desirable thing to do is to eliminate parking around the square entirely. However, in many communities where downtown parking space is already at a premium this is not possible. Each community will have to decide how many parking spaces it can give up to provide better access to the square. Often it is possible to provide additional spaces in unused locations such as the interiors of city blocks. If you feel that parking spaces around the square are needed, consider eliminating some, but not all, of the spaces. For example, you might leave an access area equal to three parking spaces between each five or six spaces reserved for cars. If this is done, easy access to the square from all surrounding points will be provided. Remember that special provisions for pedestrian safety must be made at crossings leading to such entrances to the square.

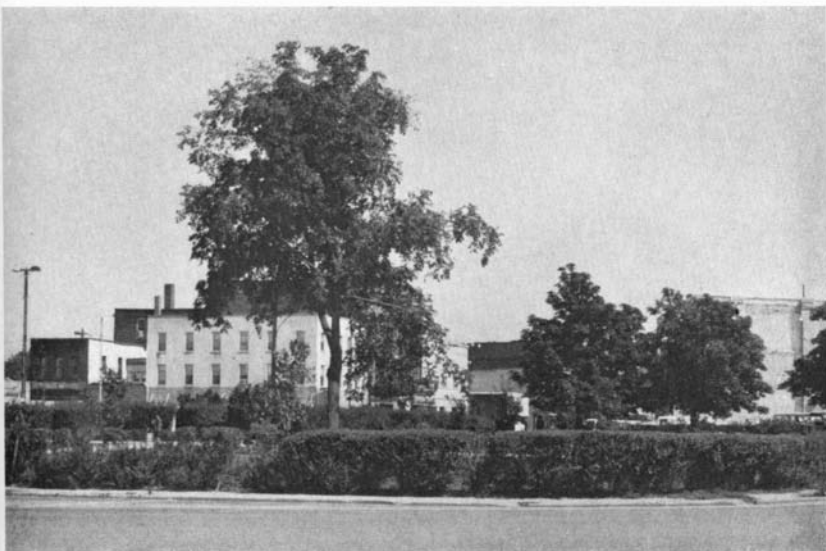
Surfacing Materials

The materials used to cover the surface of the square must be chosen carefully to insure durability and to provide properly surfaced areas for the different kinds of activities that will take place in the square. The various surfacing materials that you choose should require a minimum amount of maintenance and should complement one another in regard to color, texture, and design. The major surfacing materials include grass and ground covers, pebbly concrete, smooth concrete, brick, loose aggregate stone, and sand or tanbark for use in play areas for children.

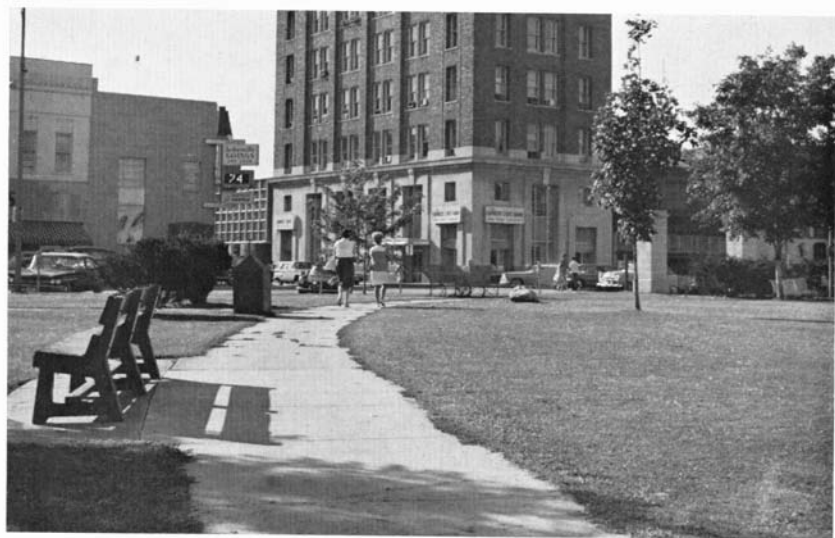
It is quite possible that in your square paths have been made across lawn areas. Such paths indicate a need for a study of the circulation patterns. The paths can be paved to facilitate their use. Otherwise they will become unsightly and will be hard to maintain. You should be consistent in your choice of surfacing materials. Thus walks should all be paved with the same type of material and areas around benches should also have the same surfacing. Since the square is usually surrounded by asphalt and concrete, the materials used for surfacing should have qualities that set the area apart from surrounding streets and buildings. However, avoid overemphasis of the ground pattern and materials at the expense of other landscape elements.

Trees and Shrubs

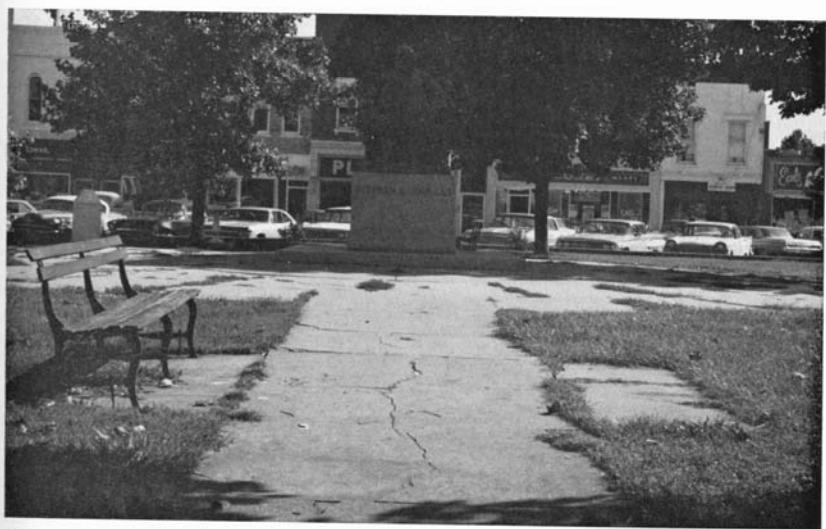
Proper use of plantings is an important part of square design and redevelopment because trees and ground covers can give a feeling of



These two squares are overcrowded with plantings that limit visual as well as physical access. Any benches that may be located in these squares are hidden from view and the areas appear more like decorative gardens than inviting open areas for public use.



The square in the top photograph is located in the center of the business district and provides a pleasant contrast with surrounding buildings. The walk allows easy pedestrian circulation in the area. The bottom illustration shows a plaza near a new courthouse that provides an attractive setting for the building. Careful coordination of planting areas, the water feature, and pavement patterns and materials increases the use and attractiveness of the area.



The top photograph shows a badly neglected courthouse square. The trees have not been cared for, the lawn is patchy, and the bench is uninviting. This area can be upgraded by planting appropriate trees and installing attractive, comfortable benches. The square in the bottom photograph was a site of one of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates and a statue of Stephen A. Douglas has been erected. However, the square itself has been allowed to deteriorate. The pavement is cracked and the weather-beaten bench is surrounded by trash.

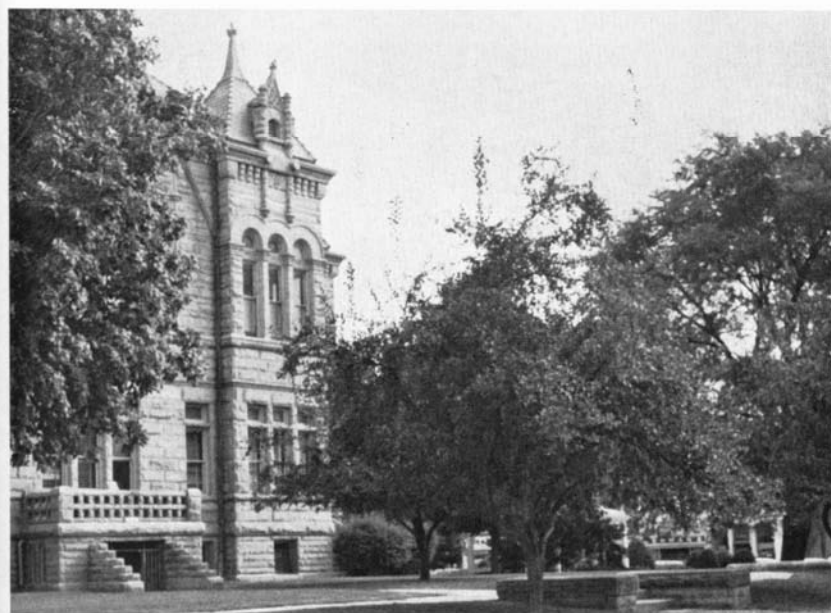
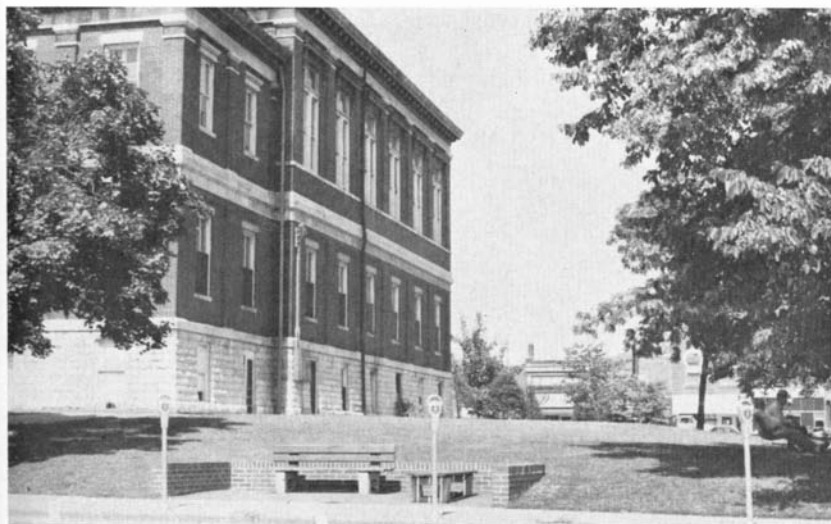
organization to the area. Plantings frame and accent various areas of the square and also set it apart from surrounding streets and buildings. Trees provide shade for walks and sitting areas within the square and give a park-like appearance to it. In choosing trees and shrubs for use in your square, the landscape architect will give careful attention to their foliage color, texture, and form, as well as to their relation to one another, so that there will be something interesting to see in the square all year.

Deciduous trees (those that shed their leaves in the winter) will be the major plantings in your public square. These trees will give form to the square, provide a feeling of enclosure, soften traffic noises, and add an element of unity to the divergent styles of nearby buildings. Deciduous trees also provide shade in the summer and allow sunlight to enter the square in the winter. Both large and small flowering trees may be used. However, avoid haphazard planting. Your landscape architect will be able to suggest what trees to use and what planting patterns to follow in order to obtain the best results in your particular situation.

Shrub plantings in the square should be held to a minimum because of the maintenance required. Shrubs tend to catch wind-blown leaves and litter discarded by the public. They also need annual pruning to keep them attractive and healthy. When shrubs are used, they should separate different use areas and delineate pedestrian traffic patterns. Plant shrubs in cultivated beds with all grass removed and mulched with a suitable material to reduce moisture loss and weed problems.

Flowers may also be included among the plantings in the public square. However, plant only as many as can adequately be cared for because flowers require a great deal of maintenance to remain attractive. Flowers should be restricted to limited areas with appropriate backgrounds to show the flowers to best advantage. Use annual flowers and limit your selection to a few varieties and color combinations. Annuals will provide a full season of interesting colors with the least amount of maintenance required.

In choosing trees, shrubs, and flowers for your public square, the landscape architect will consider soil type and acidity, the average temperature and rainfall in your community, presence of any dust or fumes near the square, and the amount of sunlight the plants will require. This must be done to make sure that the plantings in your square will survive and prosper. Help of a competent landscape architect in this phase of square rehabilitation is essential.

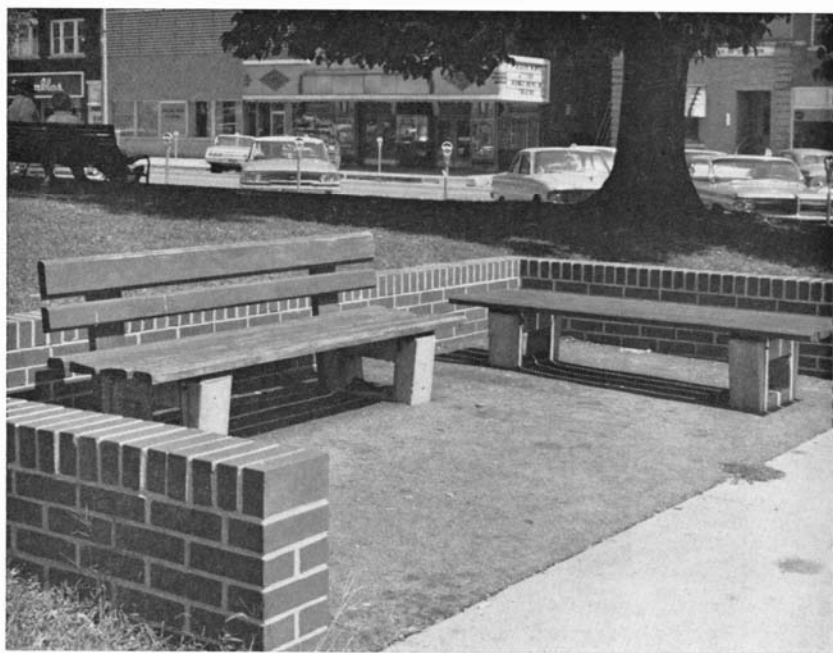


The lawn area around the upper courthouse was once converted to a paved parking area but citizens of the town demanded that it be restored to its original state. The bottom photograph shows a courthouse that is masked, but not completely surrounded by trees. The planting design allows parts of the building to be seen and appreciated for their architectural style and character.

Outdoor Furniture, Light Fixtures, and Signs

The development of the square is in many ways similar to building and furnishing a home. In both cases, after suitable flooring and carpeting has been selected and the space has been given form and a feeling of enclosure, the area is furnished for the people who will use it. So far we have discussed surfacing elements and plantings for a square. The next items to consider are benches, plant containers, wastepaper receptacles, light fixtures, and signs. These constitute the "furniture" of the square. They should have a continuity of design but vary somewhat in color and material.

Often little attention has been given to design and placement of benches and other facilities in public squares. In many squares any benches that are present are old and unattractive. Similarly, trash receptacles are often badly designed, neglected, and placed in inconvenient locations. If you expect people to use facilities in the square, these things must be avoided or corrected.



A comfortable conversation and relaxation area such as the one shown above can be constructed without great cost. The area provides a place for people to rest and to engage in conversation at breaks or rest periods. The low brick wall gives a feeling of enclosure. Notice the change in paving material in the seating area.

Benches in the square should be attractive and comfortable. They should also be constructed of materials that will withstand all types of weather. The scale and arrangement of benches must be well planned to achieve diversity and still have intimate grouping of benches in several different areas of the square. Benches should be anchored so that people cannot move them and destroy your carefully planned arrangement. Permanently installed benches also make maintenance easier and help control use of the various areas in the square.

Trash containers should be carefully designed and constructed in regard to scale, material, and color and placed in strategic locations in the square so that they will be used. Such locations are near benches, walk intersections, and entrances to any buildings in the square. It is also a good idea to provide urns with sand in them where people may discard cigarettes. The need for proper maintenance is obvious because trash containers that are not frequently emptied will often tip over and litter the square.

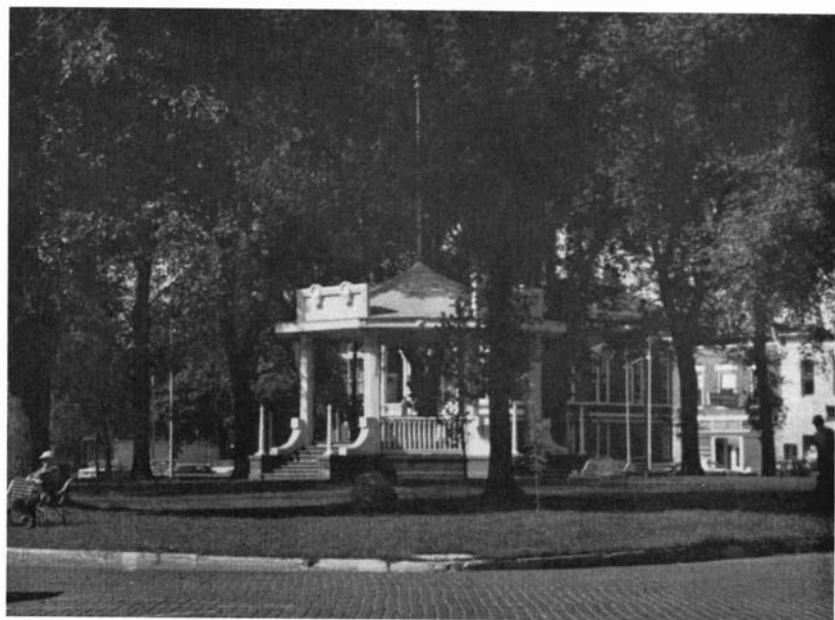
Light fixtures and signs in the square should be designed so that they complement the outdoor furniture, the plantings, and the appearance of the square in general without being imposing. Neat and legible signs identical in style should be used throughout the area. They should be placed at appropriate locations in the square to inform the public and direct visitors through the area. Enough lighting must be provided to illuminate the square so that people can use it in the evenings. An effective way of illuminating the square in addition to the usual light fixtures is to place special fixtures near trees. In this way light will reflect off branches and leaves and put emphasis on the structure of the tree.

Play Equipment for Children

If there is sufficient room in your public square, it is a good idea to set an area aside for children. This is not to say that the entire square should be turned into a playground. Perhaps you can install one or two special items such as a group of sculptured concrete turtles or a small structure for climbing. A sand box or a set of teeter-totters are also possibilities. Benches where mothers can watch children at play can be provided near the play area.

Coordinating the Plan

In order to have a functional public square as well as an attractive one all the elements in it must be considered in relation to one another. Benches and trash receptacles should not clash in design and color.



The bandstand has always added charm and character to the public square. In many cases bandstands have been torn down, but where they still exist, they should be carefully preserved. The two bandstands above have been kept in good repair so that they remain attractive features of the square.



The top illustration shows another example of a well-designed and maintained bandstand. The bottom photo, however, shows a modern version of the bandstand that is in jarring contrast with the character of buildings surrounding the area. This feeling is accentuated by the massive plantings around the base that mask all of the structure except the canopy.

Signs and light fixtures should also be compatible. Trees, flowers, and shrubs should be chosen and arranged to complement other elements in the square and to give it a park-like appearance. Maintenance is also usually easier if the various benches, fixtures, and signs are similar in design and material.

Structures such as bandstands, rest rooms, and large pieces of sculpture are often placed in the public square. They should be properly located in relation to other parts of the square and should be designed to be compatible with the architectural character of the rest of the square and the courthouse as well as the architecture of other nearby buildings.

If there is a courthouse or other large structure in your public square, it will heavily influence your choice of all other elements in the area. For example, large trees should be planted near the building so that there will be a pleasing relationship of scale between the building and the trees. Smaller trees can be planted farther away. The courthouse will also influence the pattern of walks in the square since most of the walks will lead to the courthouse's doors. You may also wish to design signs and light fixtures to reflect some facet of the courthouse's architecture and in this way to add a feeling of unity to the square. Finally, because the courthouse probably occupies a large area of the



If play areas for children are included in the square, they should be located away from the street. In the above illustration play equipment has been placed adjacent to the street creating a hazardous situation for both children and motorists.

square, room for flower beds, benches, playgrounds, and other facilities may be limited. Do not attempt to place too many things in too small a space. Your professional landscape architect will be able to suggest exactly what type and what number of facilities your community's public square can accommodate.

Since the public square is usually at or near the center of the community's downtown business district, the square's redevelopment is closely related to improvements you may be planning to make in the appearance of the business district. Rehabilitation of the downtown business area is discussed in Circular 937, "New Life for Your Business District," which may be obtained from your county extension office or by writing to the College of Agriculture, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

The material in this publication has been an outline of design considerations and concepts to guide you in the redevelopment of your community's public square. Keep in mind the historical background of the square as you, with the help of your landscape architect, plan to make it once more the central point of your community.